Cover Story

Making (Radio) Waves

At KFJC, radio is innovative, influential and, most of all, fun

By David Plotnikoff
Mercury News Entertainment Writer

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Inside M-1 is a separate universe ruled by a man who calls himself Christ — M.C. Christ. His domain is a thin band of FM airspace, KFJC (89.7), powered by 250 watts that can reach from San Francisco to Gilroy. He is the overseer of the airwaves. The god who cannot be talked back to. The man making the noise with the lawn mower.

For a god, Matt Callahan is not much to look at. The 26-year-old disc jockey is whippet-thin and ghastly pale, with a long black-and-red ponytail that falls halfway down the back of his white T-shirt. His five bracelets jangle as he works the controls in the station's master broadcast booth.

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The tiny community-college station has been pushing the boundaries for more than 12 years now — ever since a band of young renegade staffers overthrew a soporific album rock format and brought the punk/new wave explosion to the South Bay. Often, it has been one of the first to break acts (such as U2 and Midnight Oil) that would eventually ride to the top of the pop charts.

And over the years, the station's influence has multiplied as alumni move into key positions with record companies and big-time commercial radio. This past January, KFJC was picked by the Gavin Report, a respected radio trade journal, as one of the top five college stations in the country. "They are one of the few stations who do a broad eclectic mix and do it right," says Linda Ryan, alternative music editor for the Gavin Report.

Now, 12 years after the revolution, the Little Station That Roared is struggling with questions about its identity. While the young Turks — general manager Doug Kelly, program director Les Scurry and music director Callahan — fight to remain at the forefront with aggressive and experimental music, others wonder if the audience that came of age with KFJC will go along for what's sure to be a rough ride. If the future of KFJC lies with lawn-mower music, some of those who built the station would just as soon not hear it.

Background music

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"Low's philosophy was to run KFJC as a training school for the industry, which meant — to him — running it like a miniature version of the area's two dominant mainstream rock stations," remembers Robert Zepernick II (a.k.a. Ransome Youth), who was at the station in 1978. "It was a super-tight format. There were controls on what you could or couldn't play. And Low lived right down the hill from the school. If he didn't like what you were playing, he would come up and physically *pull* you off the air."

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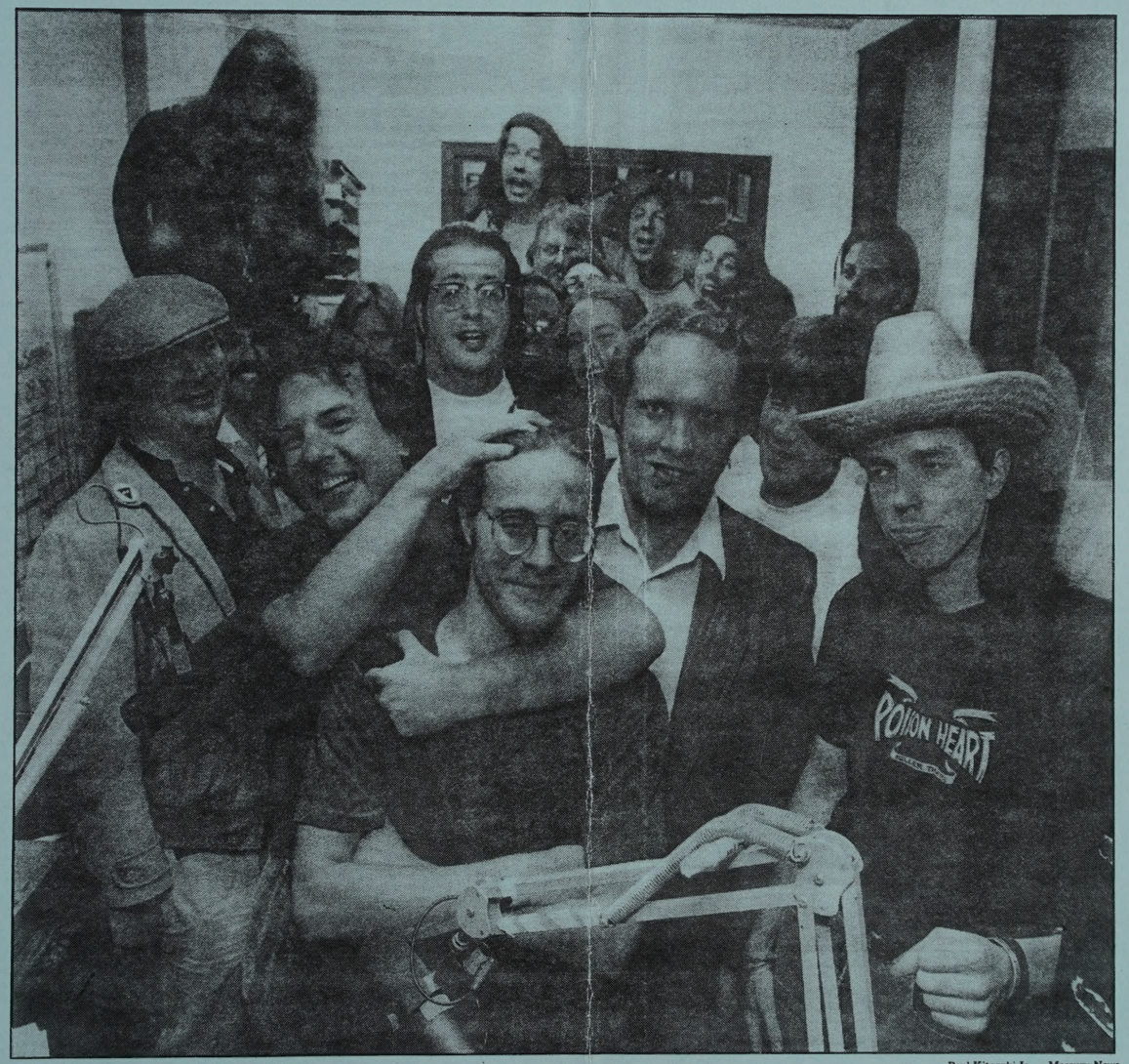
They could not have picked a better time to stage a revolt. The British punk explosion and the New York new wave scene had turned into a full-fledged cultural conflagration. KFJC quickly became virtually the only place on the dial where one could hear the latest by such groups as the Clash, the Buzzcocks and Stiff Little Fingers. Two years after the overthrow, the Wave of the West (as the station still calls itself) crashed into the big time with a power boost from 10 watts to 250 and a switch to round-the-clock programming.



Paul Kitagaki Jr. — Mercury News

In the foreground, and forefront, of KFJC's staff of students, volunteers and true believers: Kevin Hardiman, left, with his arms around Les Scurry; Robert Zepernick II; and Matt Callahan, complete with cowboy hat.

Alternative power sources, Page 24
The 'Louie Louie'-athon, Page 25

Life on the cutting edge

In the late '70s and the early '80s, the station broke hundreds of important groups. KFJC was the first station in the nation to play Midnight Oil, when the Australian band was still on an independent, homegrown record label. U2 granted one of its first American interviews to Zepernick and did a free show co-sponsored by the station at San Jose State's Student Union Ballroom. The Alarm's first American interview was with staffer Jeff "Stretch" Riedle. Other legendary groups who were frequent guests included the Ramones, the Go-Gos and XTC. The Replacements, the Violent Femmes and Hüsker Dü all performed benefit shows for KFJC.

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— *David Plotnikoff*

Cover Story

The move to alternative power

Small stations now wield major influence at record companies

WHEN KFJC took the plunge into alternative rock programming 12 years ago, the college market was largely ignored by the recording industry. In the beginning, much of the music played on KFJC came from small, homegrown companies working outside the established channels of distribution and promotion. Jeff McCallion (a.k.a. Sherman Peabody), who's been with the station since '79, remembers: "Early on, we were filling a niche. People wanted to get away from album-rock monotony. It was hard to get service from major labels, but when we proved we had that audience, they found us."

As punk and new wave bands began to be signed to major labels, the companies looked to the burgeoning college market to help sell their newly acquired wares. College programmers who were used to letting their taste and that of their listeners dictate playlists were quickly introduced to the subtle pressures of the marketplace.

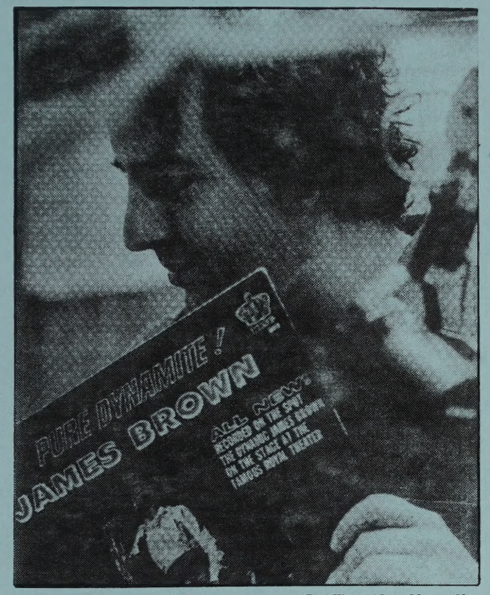
Radio trade journals began reporting on the college market and printing college playlist charts. Even Billboard magazine, the giant of the entertainment trades, began printing an alternative rock chart. By the mid-'80s, most major labels had at least one staffer assigned to the college market.

Today, many KFJC alums find themselves in record-company jobs created over the past decade in response to the commercial explosion of alternative rock styles.

KITS-FM in San Francisco and other commercial "modern music" stations now follow the college market carefully and add tracks by bands they consider palatable to their audience. Meanwhile, the college stations try to stay a few steps away from their commercial counterparts. Some, like KFJC, emphasize jazz, blues, experimental music and other genres unlikely to cross over to commercial stations.

Three other South Bay college stations that feature an alternative rock format are: KSCU-FM (103.3), Santa Clara University; KSJS-FM (90.7), San Jose State University; and KZSU-FM (90.1), Stanford University. ■

— David Plotnikoff



Paul Kitagaki Jr. — Mercury News

Disc jockey Kevin Hardiman readies a cut from the hardest working man in show business, Soul Brother No. 1, James Brown.

KFJC plays the Bay Area's broadest broadcasting mix

KFJC, from Page 17

roof trying to find a way to get in through the ventilation shaft.

Countless students manning the overnight shifts have fallen asleep at the controls. In the entire oral history that's trickled down from generation to generation of staffers, the strangest legend concerns a neophyte disc jockey in '79 who received a mysterious phone call during his show. Without a word, he put the phone down, walked out of the control booth, out of the station, and kept walking. He never returned.

A free-form staff

Today, station supervisor Doc Pelzel and Zepernick estimate there are about 70 active members of the KFJC staff, although there's a gray area populated by alumni who come and go, doing fill-in shifts and other station duties. By most accounts, KFJC is not a job but a loose-knit tribe that one joins — potentially for life.

"I spent some time thinking about it this quarter, and I tried to explain to the new ones," says Frank Luft (a.k.a. Phil Dirt), a 43-year-old surf-music scholar who looks like a cross between Harry Dean Stanton and Howard Hughes. "The reason we have so many old timers is that we're not a student-based station. Anyone can join, so we get a mixture of backgrounds and ages. And it's that blend of long- and short-term staffers that gives the station its continuity and energy."

Anyone looking for the very portrait of devotion need look no further than Luft. He joined the station in 1964 as "just a footloose kid, straight out of Cupertino High School and obsessed with radio." He left in '67 and returned in '80. These days, he commutes from Santa Cruz to the mandatory station meetings on Wednesday nights and his long-running surf-rock show on Saturday nights. "It's a window away from my day-to-day life," said Luft, who's a stockroom supervisor for Beta Technology in Santa Cruz. "And, it's also an opportunity to pass on what was given to me."

For a person walking into M-1 today, getting from the classroom to the master control booth is a one-year process that begins with one quarter of training in radio theory, the Federal Communications Commission and other related topics. The second quarter concentrates on the mechanics of day-to-day station operation and functions as an introduction to the various departments (music, promotions, production, news, public affairs, etc.). By the third quarter, aspiring jocks may enter a 10-week apprenticeship with a senior jock. Finally, they turn in a proposal for a show and an audition tape. By the fourth quarter students may "get their air-legs," as Pelzel puts it, on their first graveyard shift, and begin moving up the ladder to a prime weekly slot.

"There's a sense of family here that tends to make people very loyal," says Jeff McCallion (a.k.a. Sherman Peabody), who came to the station in '79 and still does occasional fill-in slots. "The station attracts a lot of people who . . . were always a little bit different . . . maybe a little bit introverted . . . but creative. Being on the air is almost like leading a double life."

Zepernick estimates that 2,500 people have sought that double life over the last decade. "The program appeals to people so socially inept they can't conduct a normal conversation face to face," Pelzel jokes. "Also, it helps if you have a bent set of priorities."

Foothill College provides a bit less than half of the station's funding, Pelzel, the station's only salaried faculty member, estimates. The rest comes from: institutional public service announcements paid for by local corporations, used-record swaps, student-body funds, business underwriting of shows, donations and sales of paraphernalia such as shirts and coffee mugs.

"We get great support from the college with the hidden expenses that come with running the facility. But generally they look to us as more of a community station than a campus station," says Pelzel, who is the station's liaison with the college and FCC. The college's hands-off attitude toward station operations goes back as far as any staffers can remember.

From jazz to Jack Webb

The breadth of programming that fills KFJC today is possibly unrivaled anywhere in the Bay Area. Consider that the station's library (one of the largest in the Bay Area) contains approximately 40,000 titles. You could play music 24 hours a day for *3½ years* without repeating a song.

Although the great majority of non-specialty shows are rock 'n' roll, on any given evening it would not be uncommon to hear a hardcore "industrial" dance track, a classic Billie Holiday torch song, and Jack Webb (of "Dragnet" fame) doing a poetic reading of Otis Redding's "Try A Little Tenderness." The station's often-brilliant blues and jazz specialty programs air on weekday mornings. And on Saturdays, there's even the "Norman Bates Memorial Soundtrack Show" — where you stand a good chance of hearing Ricardo Montalban singing "Monkey in the Mango Tree."

As music director, Callahan's job for the past year has been to give the eclectic programming some core identity and direction. He accomplishes this by selecting "currents" — a set of about 50 records that all non-specialty jocks are required to dip into for 35 percent of the material on their shows. Recently the stack of currents that resides on the top shelf in the master booth included an eclectic selection of new releases by artists such as Peter Rowan, Soul Asylum and Jane's Addiction, as well as an African pop sampler.

Not surprisingly, just what di-

See RADIO, Page 25

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Cover Story

It all started with 'Louie Louie'

KFJC's rock — and rollicking humor — continue a tradition

IF ONE element has distinguished KFJC's programming from the rest of the Bay Area college pack over the years, it would probably be the longstanding prankster tradition that's lingered in M-1.

No prank will ever top the "Louie Louie" marathons masterminded by Jeff Riedle and Frank Luft, which catapulted the station onto the front page of the Wall Street Journal and onto television stations around the country.

"Louie Louie" was the first rock 'n' roll record aired on KFJC, in 1966 by a disc jockey named Woody Muff. The first marathon ran on Aug. 1, 1981, from 3 a.m. to 5 a.m., and contained 33 versions of the song. The second marathon took place on May 28, 1982, lasted 5½ hours, and contained a mind-boggling 88 versions. For a while, rival KALX-FM in Berkeley tried to make a go of it and even held the record in December of '82 with 200 versions.

On Aug. 19 of '83 came the Louie to End All Louie. The entire staff was mobilized for the effort, and the call went out that any and all renditions of the Kingsmen's classic would be aired. Around the clock, they played everything from the Surfaris' bagpipe version to computer-generated renditions. There were doorbell Louies, reggae Louies and a classical take called "Ludwig Ludwig."

Then, 18 hours into the marathon, Richard Berry, who wrote the song in 1955, showed up. Two Japanese exchange students who happened by the station were hastily introduced to Berry and briefed on the concept. Within 30 minutes, there was a fresh Japanese "Louie" — led by Berry himself.

Sixty-three hours and 15 minutes after it started, "Louie III" came to a crashing end with version No. 823. Documents were submitted to the Guinness Book of World Records. The heroic effort was rejected because no such category existed. Immortality was not to elude them entirely, though: Shortly after the third marathon, the station collaborated with Rhino Records to put out a compilation album of Louies.

April Fools' Day is often the most creative day of any given year at KFJC. Over the years, the station has lampooned heavy metal, news/talk, "new age" and Top 40 formats. One year, it was "All-Dave" radio, featuring — you guessed it — all deejays named Dave playing all music by various musical Davies. In 1983, the station began April Fools' Day with a rotation of 100 songs and gradually deleted cuts from the list. The final hour consisted of only one song, the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K."

The latest chapter in the great KFJC annals of creative subversion began in January 1988, when five female Foothill disc jockeys started an innocuous in-studio joke called the Guttersluts. They came into being when, on a whim, the women produced a bogus celebrity station I.D. ("Hi, we're the Guttersluts. And when we're in Los Altos Hills, we listen to KFJC ...")

Soon, T-shirts advertising the non-existent band became cult items, particularly among heavy metal stars — including members of Guns n' Roses and Skid Row. The band's first song, "Honeycomb Rock," was recorded in the back room of Riedle's Streetlight Records in San Jose, by Luft. The song became a No. 1 hit on KFJC, naturally. Since mustering the courage to actually perform live, the women have become the darlings of the South Bay club scene. ■

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Paul Kitagaki Jr. — Mercury News

Robert Zepernick II and Matt Callahan — two mainstays in the wild KFJC staff of pranksters and jokers.

Just your basic free-form, no-holds-barred, off-the-wall alternative radio station

RADIO, from Page 24

rection Callahan and Scurry, 28, are going is the subject of much discussion within this organization, where music is taken as seriously as politics and religion. Their own shows — Scurry's "Hellfire Club" and Callahan's "Intestinal Dysfunction Program" — are among the very noisiest and most abrasive out there.

Callahan is considered farther out there than Scurry by a galactic mile. Politically, relinquishing the driver's seat to Callahan and Scurry could be compared to giving Jesse Helms and Jerry Falwell the co-chairmanship of the Republican Party.

But just how many listeners are coming along for the ride? The last figures the station received from the Arbitron rating service were in '87, when about 30,000 people tuned into KFJC in a given week.

Callahan doubts that many of Foothill's young students bother to listen to the station. And he doesn't seem particularly distressed by this. "With the music we play, we're developing an older, more cerebral core listenership, and attracting fewer kids with a pop orientation."

Pelzel, the faculty overseer who has always made it a point to give the managers under him free rein, believes the jocks should be constantly challenging their audiences and themselves. "We want people to realize that there's more out there than just their favorite kind of music.

"Most of the (music) sold at Tower is like McDonald's, but here we're sort of like the greasy spoon down the street. No Styrofoam, just home-cooked goods of many nationalities."

Others wonder if the current regime hasn't totally forgotten that radio exists not only for their exploration, but also for the pleasure of the people on the other end. The increasingly user-unfriendly nature of some programming has more than a few current and former staffers wondering if anyone is bothering to tune in anymore.

Jim McCutchen (a.k.a. Neal Prey), 36, was a disc jockey and former program director with the station from '81 to '87: "It's a challenge to listen to the station now, and often it's not always that rewarding. I think the noisier programming is very arrogant."

Robert McGlynn (a.k.a. Robert Emmett), who hosts a weekly talk show, was more succinct: "My feeling is that if you're just playing music to merely annoy, well, that's what neighbors are for. When you're on the radio, you're trying to communicate."

Perhaps the most strident comments about the station's current direction come from Riedle, who presided over some of the station's finest moments in the early and mid '80s. Today, he's still nominally involved with the station as an underwriter and a music retailer who relies heavily on college radio to expose his customers to new music.

"I get the impression that the feeling up there is, 'If anyone else is playing it, then we don't want it.' It's extremely difficult to listen to," Riedle says. "They're pushing away the listeners who could help them regain the leadership position. They're pushing *me* away and I've been a supporter for 10 years."

'To boldly go . . .'

It's Tuesday night, and the oldest captain of them all is at the helm of Starship KFJC — Robert Zepernick II. If there was one person who embodies all the glory that was — and is — KFJC, it would be this great, grinning, tow-headed bear of a 35-year-old with the hand-grenade earring and the green glitter loafers. If Moses and John Madden were somehow fused, the result would look and sound like Zep.

Tonight, just as he has every Tuesday night for at least 10 years, the man known on the air as Ransome Youth will pilot the 250-watt vehicle of the airwaves with heavy doses of hilarity and several moments of total terror and confusion. The hilarity comes easily. This is someone with an almost overpowering evangelical fervor to let the world know that radio should be *fun*. The terror comes when he momentarily loses track of just what is *going on the air* . . .

A song that stops abruptly or a public service announcement that ends too soon when his back is turned and it's: "Hey? . . . HEY! WHOOOOOOOOOOOOaaaaaaaa. You'retunedtoKFJCthewaveofthe westandthisisRansomeYouth. What am I doing? I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING, but here's . . ." He grabs a CD and pops it in the player with one fluid motion perfected over thousands of nights.

Of course, he does know what he's doing. Between 200 and 300 aspiring broadcasters have trained at his side. But this is radio, not brain surgery — and through all the late nights and all the fund-raisers and all the station meetings Robert Zepernick II has never forgotten that.

Tonight's journey will feature stops with the Velvet Underground, the Spizzles and Laibach. Next week it will be the Flying Lizards, Tupelo Chain Sex and Louis Armstrong. All are within the domain of Ransome Youth.

The question arises: After all this time, why stay?

For once, the supreme Senior Prankster turns serious. He seems almost hurt by the question. He turns away from the control board and looks around at the capsule world that's been his second home for 14 years. "I've put a lot of work into this place," he says quietly. "People are gonna come and go, but . . . this . . . what we built here is bigger than all of us." ■

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